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BOOKS

PAPER TIGER

Daniel Ellsberg's war.

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

To anyone over a certain age (forty-five?), Daniel Ellsberg needs no introduction, but it would be quite a challenge to explain Ellsberg to someone who had never heard of him. There was this brilliant young man from the Midwest who in 1948 went to Harvard on a scholarship, studied economics, demonstrated great promise, and got inducted into the small, super-élite company of game theorists, whose lifework was to formulate and fine-tune an American deterrence policy that would insure that the Cold War never became a nuclear war. Ellsberg, enthusiastic about this calling, served in the Marine Corps and then went to work for the RAND Corporation, the Santa Monica beachfront consulting firm, where the best defense intellectuals thought the unthinkable. He had a Forrest Gump-like talent for popping up at key moments and for meeting historical figures. In 1964, he moved to Washington to work in the E Ring of Robert McNamara's Pentagon, just at the moment when it was determining Vietnam War policy. A year later, he went to Vietnam, where his guides in Saigon and the jungles and rice paddies of the surrounding countryside were General Edward Lansdale, the model for Pyle in Graham Greene's "The Quiet American," and Colonel John Paul Vann, the antihero of Neil Sheehan's "A Bright Shining Lie." Guns and jeeps and patrols and ambushes replaced memos and meetings and press conferences as the stuff of Ellsberg's routine.

On his return to the United States, in 1967, Ellsberg embarked on a peculiar life, travelling back and forth between the anti-war movement and the top level of the foreign-policy establishment. In the winter of 1968, he was called to the Hotel Pierre, in New York, by his old Harvard acquaintance Henry Kissinger to help the incoming Nixon Administration with its war planning. In the summer of 1969, while attending a confer-

ence on "Liberation and Revolution," he stood outside a Philadelphia post office at a vigil supporting a draft resister who was about to be sentenced. The following summer, Kissinger, on a visit to Richard Nixon's vacation home in San Clemente, summoned Ellsberg's friend Lloyd Shearer, of *Parade*, to advise him about the news management of his love life. Shearer brought along Ellsberg, whom Kissinger fobbed off on Alexander Haig so that he could speak privately with Shearer about the ins and outs of dating starlets. But, as Ellsberg was leaving, Kissinger invited him to come back for a talk—and Ellsberg cut short his honeymoon so that he could make it. One day in the spring of 1971, Ellsberg, in the company of Noam Chomsky and other friends, was teargassed by police in Washington for blocking traffic as part of an anti-war protest, then flew to New York so that he could hear McGeorge Bundy speak at the Council on Foreign Relations. Robert Kennedy, William Fulbright, and Clark Clifford were among the other eminences with whom Ellsberg had private meetings on Vietnam. When his anti-war activities made his position at RAND untenable, he left—only to be given a plummy international-relations fellowship at M.I.T.

What finally ended this double life, and made Ellsberg world famous rather than just well connected, was his decision to leak a seven-thousand-page history of how the Vietnam War was planned, which the Pentagon had prepared for internal use. Long excerpts appeared in the *Times*, beginning on June 13, 1971, and then in the *Washington Post* and several other newspapers. But this was the culmination of a campaign, as Ellsberg's fascinating new book, "Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers" (Viking; \$29.95), explains. Years earlier, Ellsberg had begun surreptitiously peeping at secret government documents ("It was like opening the

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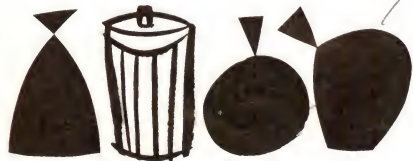
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show those ballet snobs”)—and, come to think of it, was a little tendentious, once, even in her hands—has by now yielded her a full, eloquent, and unself-conscious language. When Eddie, who is a car mechanic, does a grande pirouette à la seconde, it doesn't look put on; it looks beautiful, and makes him noble and important, the same way it would in “Swan Lake.” And when, at the onset of his delirium, he drops to the floor and, like a break dancer, turns five revolutions upside down in the air on the base of his left shoulder, that, too, seems perfectly appropriate. Many of the numbers in “Movin’ Out” are closely related to dances Tharp has made before—the three acrobatic duets for Tony and Brenda could have come straight out of the 1982 “Nine Sinatra Songs”—but that’s her right. She has a style; she goes on using it; God bless her. And, actually, Tony and Brenda’s getting-back-together duet, to Joel’s “Shameless,” is not like anything she’s done before. It is more fevered—a dance of crazy love. At its end, Tony goes down on his knees to Brenda; she, in turn, squats down unprettily and embraces his chest with her knees. (This doesn’t look dirty; it looks affectionate.) He grabs her and more or less wipes her across his body. They exit in a big, disorderly, sweaty, ecstatic heap.

But we’ve known for a long time that Tharp could make love duets. The revelation in this show is that she can also do dramatic dances, numbers that collect the emotions that have built in a scene, and nail them. At the end of Act I, the Hicksville boys have returned from the war. All the main characters are there in front of us, minus the dead James. Eddie and Tony stand stiffly at center stage. Brenda hovers on the sidelines. No one wants her anymore; no one wants love. Then Judy, in black, bourrées backward to stand between the two men. So Eddie and Tony will also be separated. Everyone will be alone, lost. The tableau looks like something out of a fourteenth-century religious painting.



Of all the choreographers I know, Tharp has the greatest knack for choosing dancers. She always hires the best people, and they perform better for her than they ever have for anyone else. The first-cast principals of “Movin’ Out,” all ballet-trained, are the members of her present, small dance company: John Selya, Keith Roberts, Benjamin Bowman, Ashley Tuttle, and Elizabeth Parkinson. They are superb, and they can act, too—a gift not invariably seen in good dancers. Parkinson made some sense of Brenda, which wasn’t easy to do. (Holly Cruikshank, in the second cast, couldn’t manage it.) Tuttle and Bowman, in the difficult, goody-goody roles of Judy and James, got you to love them for exactly what they were—for the pressed chinos, the pink dress, the engagement ring. Keith Roberts, as Tony, was the very picture of masculine innocence, his big, bared chest a kind of page on which, you knew, life’s sorrows would be written. You wanted to rescue him—take him home, put him to bed. As for John Selya (Eddie), this utterly remarkable dancer languished for years in “character” roles—the drunken peasant, the prince’s friend—at American Ballet Theatre. You watched him and you thought, Doesn’t the administration notice that this guy is dancing harder than anybody else up there? Tharp noticed. I first saw “Movin’ Out” with the second cast, and I thought that no one could possibly be better than that cast’s Eddie, William Marrié. (The second-cast Tony, David Gomez, was also tremendous. Good as Tharp is with all dancers, she is best with men.) But Selya is different. Unlike Marrié, he banks his fires. He knows he is the center of the show, and he paces it carefully. In Act I, he concentrates on the quick, quizzical half moves that are Tharp’s language for working-class troubles. Only in Act II does he explode, and even then he never goes purple. Even when he’s doing something big, like a drug-induced psychosis, he is still doing something small, subtle. Tharp should thank her dancers. Then again, they should thank her. If Selya had stayed at A.B.T., he would have gained weight and lost hope. Now he is a star, which is what he should have been all along. But it took Tharp, and this imperfect but bold and serious show. ♦

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door on Ali Baba's treasure"), purloining them, and strategically giving them away in the hope of impeding the government's war planning. His greatest triumph in this line was several leaks in March, 1968, to Neil Sheehan, then a *Times* reporter, of documents suggesting that the American military leadership had regularly given President Johnson misleadingly optimistic reports about how the war was going. Within two weeks, Johnson announced that he would halt American bombing above the 20th Parallel, begin peace talks, and not run for reelection; it looked as if Ellsberg had almost single-handedly engineered the beginning of the end of the war. But the war didn't end, and Ellsberg started down a path that led to the Pentagon Papers. It was quite a long path. Merely the logistics of the project, in those early days of photocopying, were more complicated than you'd think; many pages of "Secrets" are devoted, and never uninterestingly, to copy shops and suitcases and airplanes and cardboard boxes and scissors and glue. There were long, fruitless negotiations with several possible recipients of the Papers, mostly liberal senators, before negotiations began with the *Times*.

But the publication of the Pentagon Papers, which copiously documented how uncertain an enterprise the Vietnam War had always been, didn't bring the war to an end; indeed, Nixon escalated it. Even people over a certain age may have trouble recalling what the Pentagon Papers actually said. After the Justice Department decided to enjoin the *Times* from publishing them, the discussion of the Papers shifted from their content to the freedom-of-the-press dispute, which the Supreme Court decided in the press's favor. Once Ellsberg was identified as the leaker, he briefly went on the lam in Cambridge, then turned himself in, was put on trial, and was set free. He ends "Secrets" by making a detailed and persuasive case that the leak of the Pentagon Papers did help end the war, though in a way he hadn't anticipated: by setting in motion the Watergate scandal. Richard Nixon wasn't entirely displeased with the publication of the Papers, since the historical period they covered ended ten months before he took office, and thus made the war look like the fault of the Kennedy and

Johnson Administrations. On the other hand, Nixon intuited correctly that Ellsberg might possess more inside information, this time about his own Administration. Before Nixon's Plumbers undertook the Watergate burglary, they broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in Beverly Hills, looking for material that could be used to blackmail or discredit

psychiatrist's-office break-in than to the Watergate burglary, and that the "smoking gun" tape that led to Nixon's resignation, in August, 1974, recorded Nixon approving a payment of hush money to the mastermind of the Ellsberg operation, E. Howard Hunt. Within less than a year, the American war in Vietnam was finally over. If you buy Ellsberg's



The Pentagon Papers were the culmination of years of strategic leaking.

him. (During the period when Ellsberg was in psychoanalysis, which is what the Plumbers were presumably seeking to document, he was living on the beach in Malibu, driving a white Triumph Spitfire convertible, and putting "most of my energy . . . obsessively into a bachelor private life.")

Ellsberg points out that there is much stronger evidence tying Nixon to the

theory, what really helped end the war was the maddening effect on Nixon of Ellsberg's existence: an establishment radical spreading stolen information—the enemy within.

Ellsberg has evidently spent a good part of the past three decades working on this book. "Secrets" is not the hasty memoir of somebody in the news who is aware of how fast his star is fading. It's

long and meticulous; every scene is thoroughly researched and carefully paced, and fitted to its place in Ellsberg's over-all political progression. Ellsberg encapsulates each of the anti-war movement's main phases. The Pentagon section of "Secrets" is a wonderful evocation of the intoxicatingly frantic routine of the over-achievers who populate the next-to-the-top level of government; it shows Ellsberg and his colleagues planning the war with utter confidence in its justness as a cause and with contemptuous disregard for Congress, public opinion, and the woefully gullible press. In the Vietnam section, Ellsberg segues into the "quagmire" position that dominated liberal thinking about the war in the mid-sixties, according to which the real (but perhaps remediable) problem was the corruption of the South Vietnamese government and MACV, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. On his return to the United States, Ellsberg adopts the view that the problem is with the basic purpose of the war effort, not its efficacy. He becomes increasingly angry, and, as he does, the logic of his position becomes fuzzier. Sometimes he seems to be a pacifist who simply opposes all government-sponsored violence. At other times, he suggests that the specific aims and conduct of the United States were evil: after the publication of the Pentagon

Papers, he tells *Newsweek* that they are "the U.S. equivalent of the Nuremberg war-crimes documents."

As Ellsberg's fervor grows, so does his willingness to violate the boundaries of ordinary behavior. Ellsberg doesn't only steal classified government documents and give them away; he also subordinates his personal dealings to the cause. Again and again, he presents little scenes in which people confess to him that, although they are every bit as anti-war as he is, they lack his willingness to risk everything for the movement. Ellsberg, meanwhile, puts the cause ahead of both his own welfare and that of his friends and family. The head of RAND, Harry Rowen, a close and loyal friend, loses his job because of him. Ellsberg, having missed a good deal of his son's childhood while away in Washington and Vietnam, decides to bond with the boy by bringing him in on the photocopying of the Pentagon Papers. Then he informs his ex-wife that he probably will have to stop supporting her and their children, because he's going to leak the Papers and go to jail.

The publication of "Secrets" is uncannily well timed. Ellsberg's first day of work in the Pentagon, in the summer of 1964, coincided with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which became

the basis for a congressional resolution that gave Lyndon Johnson almost unlimited authority to pursue the Vietnam War. Ellsberg establishes that the incident was not the military attack on an American ship that Congress thought it was, and that the Administration was cooking up evidence to justify a course of action it had already decided upon. Just a few weeks ago, Congress passed a resolution authorizing a war with Iraq, which gives the President the widest war-making latitude since the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.

But there are some obvious difficulties in looking for guidance about Iraq in Ellsberg's Vietnam narrative. Given the copious news leaks and op-ed skirmishes of the past six months, nobody could argue that if people only knew what kind of policy arguments were taking place inside the Administration we wouldn't be heading to war. Thanks in no small part to Daniel Ellsberg, the authority of official Washington no longer feels unitary and unquestionable. Is there any conceivable secret document one could leak that would defuse the coming war in the way that Ellsberg imagined the Pentagon Papers would defuse the war in Vietnam? (A C.I.A. assessment that Saddam Hussein poses no immediate military threat to the United States was made public just before the vote on the war resolution, and had no discernible effect.) Still, Vietnam and Iraq are a useful pairing if we're looking at why the United States goes to war when its immediate survival isn't at stake.

Why *did* Ellsberg believe that the publication of the Pentagon Papers would help end the war? People often put this question to Ellsberg when he was shopping the Pentagon Papers around the Senate office buildings. "Isn't it after all only history?" Senator Fulbright asked. For Ellsberg, though, it wasn't only history; it was a case study in the hazards of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. And that is a subject Daniel Ellsberg has thought about a lot.

"Secrets" is actually the second book that Ellsberg has published recently. The first was "Risk, Ambiguity, and Decision" (Garland; \$65), which came out last year and is a reissue of the dissertation he submitted to the Harvard economics department in 1962. Ellsberg



devoted a good portion of his life to decision theory, and made quite a significant contribution for somebody so young. People are still publishing comments on his best-known idea, the so-called "Ellsberg paradox."

The paradox arises from a series of games involving colored balls in urns. Let's say there are two urns, each of which contains a hundred balls, which are either red or black. One urn contains fifty red balls and fifty black balls. The proportion of red and black in the other urn is unknown. You can draw one ball from one of the urns, without looking, and if you draw a red ball you win a hundred dollars. Which urn will you choose?

There is no good reason to think that the chance of getting a red ball is any better in one urn than in the other, but Ellsberg found that people overwhelmingly chose the urn known to have fifty balls of each color. The person running the game would then say, "O.K., you think that urn is likelier to have a red ball; now I'm going to offer you a hundred dollars if you draw a black ball." If you turned to the fifty-fifty urn for the red ball, it would seem you had a hunch that the other urn contained more black balls, and therefore you should try to draw your black ball from it. But, overwhelmingly, people chose the fifty-fifty urn again. The Ellsberg paradox is that people so strongly prefer definite information over ambiguity that they make choices consistent neither with the laws of probability nor with themselves.

The fact that Ellsberg spent years working on this kind of problem casts an interesting light on the progression of his views on the Vietnam War. When he toured the backcountry with John Paul Vann, he was struck by how different the war looked at first hand from how it looked back in Washington. American and South Vietnamese forces were supposed to be "pacifying" South Vietnam—that is, ridding rural areas of armed opposition to the government—and American officers consistently submitted reports saying that pacification was working. Ellsberg saw that it wasn't, that the reports were naïve at best and faked at worst. Having been trained to think that bad decisions were the product of inadequate information, he concluded that the Johnson Administration was

pursuing the pacification policy because it was being lied to. Characterizing his own view at the time, Ellsberg says, "The solution seemed to be to find ways to get better information to the president."

For Ellsberg, the shattering revelation of the Pentagon Papers was that the American Presidents who made decisions about Vietnam had actually been well informed. Nobody was lying to them about the probability of success of American engagement, and they engaged anyway. All this contradicted not only Ellsberg's own explanation for mistaken judgments but a whole way of seeing the world, in which if decision-makers can be given good information they will make rational choices. But even after reading the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg remained loyal to the tenets of decision theory; in leaking the Papers to the press, he was simply changing jurisdictions, trading in a faith that perfectly informed Presidents will make rational decisions for a faith that a perfectly informed public will force rational decisions on misguided Presidents. That's why Ellsberg comes to regard "deception," "secrecy," and "lies" as the devils responsible for bad policy—they were other names for misinformation. Hidden within the morally outraged and civilly disobedient radical, in other words, was the soul of a wronged decision theorist. The publication of the Pentagon Papers presented a new kind of Ellsberg paradox: providing the public with complete information didn't have the effect that Ellsberg expected.

As a young theorist, Ellsberg had noticed that it's hard to get people to change a course they've set based on bad information, even after you've given them better information. But in the case of Vietnam (and, by extension, Iraq) there is another explanation for the failure of accurate information to produce a single, rational outcome: the decision-makers are making value judgments about how important the goal is and how high a price they are willing to pay to achieve it. American Vietnam policy mystified and enraged Ellsberg because its goal, preventing Vietnam from becoming a Communist-governed country, was much less valuable to him than it was to Congress, the public, or the various Presidents during the years when the American commitment was being ratcheted up to the level of full-scale war.

Why did Johnson and Nixon stick with a war that was going so poorly? Partly, it was a matter of wanting to avoid humiliation once the United States committed its forces. Also, they had an alternative scenario in mind: a Vietnam that looked like Korea, with a tense but stable relationship between a Communist North and a pro-American South. South Vietnam might even have moved from puppet governance to democracy, as South Korea has. And Johnson, at least, rejected an even more hawkish policy—using military force more aggressively in the hope of forcing the North to surrender. Ellsberg says that such a policy inevitably would have led to the use of nuclear weapons and a war with China, but Johnson's policy, combined with the inexhaustible determination of the North Vietnamese, produced only protracted stalemate. Johnson was balancing public and congressional opinion, the goal of preventing South Vietnam from becoming Communist, his chances of success, and the likely cost in blood and treasure of the course he chose. If he had been willing to pay any price, he might have won; if he hadn't cared about the goal, he wouldn't have escalated the war. Instead, he wound up with a compromise policy that failed horribly, and a great deal of death and destruction occurred to no end. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy made similar illogical-seeming decisions, as Ellsberg discovered when he read the Pentagon Papers, not because they were ill-informed but because they, too, regarded preventing Communist rule in South Vietnam as extremely important, though not important enough to demand all the military options at their disposal.

In the end, the Vietnam War can't be reduced to a problem of miscalculated probability. It is of the utmost importance right now that we understand that the decision to go to war is ideological, not informational: the reason people disagree vehemently about war in Iraq is not that the facts on the ground or the true prospects of American military success are being kept hidden. What they disagree about is under what conditions and by what means the United States should try to affect the governance of other countries. It's not what we know but what we believe in that makes all the difference. ♦

CHINESE BOXES

Madness and memory in the age of Tiananmen.

BY NELL FREUDENBERGER

There's an early Ha Jin story about a soldier who falls in love with a wireless operator solely on the basis of her telegraphic style. He's afraid she'll never be interested in a man like him: "His wrists were thick, and his square thumbs always embarrassed him. But everybody was impressed by the beautiful long lashes above his froggy eyes." Ha Jin's empathy for his characters is matched by his unwillingness to give them a break. Reading him is almost like falling in love: you experience anxiety, profound self-consciousness, and an uncomfortable sensitivity to the world—and somehow it's a pleasure.

Ha Jin's third novel, "The Crazy" (Pantheon; \$24), like much of his earlier work, is a complicated web of human attachments; he traps his characters in impossible situations, and leaves them there to squirm. The narrator, Jian Wan, is a student of literature in a provincial university whose mentor, Professor Yang, suffers a stroke in the spring of 1989. Because Jian is engaged to the professor's daughter—a student in Beijing who writes to him about the gathering democracy protests there—he is asked to keep his teacher company in the afternoons. As Jian sits in the hospital room, Professor Yang slowly goes mad—conducting imaginary conversations, spilling his own secrets, and giving his student an education he's not sure he wants.

Like the Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian, Ha Jin left China in the mid-eighties, and both writers' fiction has explored the place of intellectuals in a tightly controlled society. In contrast to Gao Xingjian, whose work is in Chinese and whose style places him in the tricky category of "experimental" writers, Ha Jin writes in English, with a deadpan hyperrealism. As Professor Yang bitterly laments his marriage and his chosen vocation—the entire substance of his life—Jian thinks absently, "Perhaps he should be treated by a psychiatrist; acu-

puncture or acupressure might help him too." Ha Jin's narrators often have a dense, logy air, as if they'd just woken up into the world and are blinking in its strong light. The quality stems from the author's brand of blunt observation: "I patted his back for a while to relieve his gasping. Then I began laying him down slowly. The muscles on his face



Ha Jin

twitched and twitched as though something were biting him in his mouth. I too was sick at heart." The progression of physical details saves the final sentiment from cliché; like the best realist writers, Ha Jin sneaks emotional power into the plainest declarative sentences.

Ha Jin's talent for ambivalence—for beautiful lashes fringing froggy eyes—may explain why he's so good at chronicling infidelity. Despite Jian's devotion to his fiancée, he has a crush on an older graduate student, named Weiya Su. Unhappily, he soon figures out that Professor Yang—who has been murmuring half-lucid endearments to a young woman with nipples "like coffee candy"—has been having an affair with the same

girl. Jian is forced to watch as Weiya visits her lover in the hospital, bringing him an expensive, out-of-season watermelon: "She had fed him! She didn't even bother to conceal their relationship. I was touched and upset at the same time. A feeling of isolation overcame me, as though she had been the only person I could turn to for a bit of solace, but she too had gone beyond my reach." That sense—of having lost something before actually experiencing it—recurs in Ha Jin's work. His previous novel, "Waiting," for which he won the National Book Award in 1999, describes a man who spends eighteen years trying to leave his wife; finally, he marries his lover, and nothing changes. In that novel, which alternates between a village and an urban hospital, Ha Jin explores an intimate subject with a surgeon's combination of detachment and depth. This precision is rarer in "The Crazy," where you sense an author rushing to delineate the various relationships contained in the sickroom. What is striking about both novels is Ha Jin's willingness to let his protagonist remain divided, to wish for several lives in which to pursue coexisting desires.

Like "Waiting," "The Crazy" tells a political story in sexual terms. Almost delirious, Professor Yang hopes that he and his much younger lover will be together in the next life, "when I won't be a bibliophile feeding on paper every day. I will be a man capable of honest work and worthy of a woman like you." Professor Yang has always been messianic on the subject of poetry; now, by condemning his vocation, he makes Jian wonder whether his own idealism was foolish. The professor, imagining himself doing "honest work," as a "cabbage or soybean grower," appears to have taken up the outdated ideology of the Cultural Revolution, and to have forgotten the humiliation and torture he suffered during that period. Ha Jin is apparently asking where people who came of age later are supposed to look for guidance after the political madness that ravaged the previous generation. The question resonates as long as Professor Yang remains at the center of the story; his personal betrayals of Jian are what make the historical injuries smart.

The last chapters of "The Crazy"